

Thoresen Goes on Trial-- The One Big Question

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Fresno

William Ernest Thoresen III — the San Francisco multimillionaire who loves guns with the same passion most men have for women — goes on trial here today in Federal court.

He and his handsome wife, Louise, are both charged with violating ten counts of

Federal gun laws; mainly, with shipping some 72 tons of munitions to California without permits.

If convicted, on all counts the attractive and youngish pair — both are 31 — could be sentenced to 50 years apiece in the penitentiary, plus individual fines of \$50,000.

But as Judge William N. Goodwin was scheduled to convene court in the new

Federal building here, no one could answer the one question that has been troubling Americans since April 21, 1967, when police raided Thoresen's Pacific Heights mansion:

Why does the scion of a monied Chicago steel family travel about the country, buying up everything from "schlock" ammunition to machine guns?

If Federal attorney Jerrold Ladar, who will be prosecuting Thoresen, knows the answer, he won't say.

And J. W. (Jake) Ehrlich, Thoresen's one-time attorney during his first munitions brush with the law in Northern California, wasn't much more helpful.

COLLECTOR

"He's a collector," Ehrlich told the press even while local and Federal agents were searching last year for his gangling client. "I guess you could call him a gun freak."

Thoresen, whom most serious gun buyers consider a bit of a "pigeon" (one who pays more than he should for munitions), has never explained why he accumulated, in his home and in Bay Area warehouses, such diverse items as flame throwers, Nazi helmets, sniper scopes and blank British ammunition.

And his wife, whom he met in Chicago when he was having speech problems (she was a therapist) hasn't done much to clear up the picture.

SILENCER

Federal agents have charged her, for example, with receiving a .45 caliber machine gun equipped with a silencer — the kind of weapon not even James Bond uses on assignment.

United States Attorney Cecil Poole, who may be on hand here to present portions of the Federal case, has hotly denied Thoresen was ever an employee of the government — CIA or otherwise.

Indeed, Chief State Deputy Attorney General Charles A. O'Brien, in the days following the discovery last year of Thoresen's peculiar treasure trove, accused the young hot air balloon racer of being a sexual psychopath, an man who is inclined to bomb (lit-

erally) his opponents, and a connoisseur of brass knuckles and blackjacks.

FELON

Police say Thoresen "broke his pick" when, several years ago he was convicted of stealing a cheap painting.

Upon conviction he was adjudged a felon, this prohibited him from obtaining, for a few dollars, a Federal firearms license which would have allowed him to legally deal in massive lots of munitions.

But why didn't he have his wife obtain such a license — which presumably would have rendered them both immune from prosecution — has never been made clear.

CRASH

And even as Thoresen was scheduled to enter court here today, San Francisco police were seeking him over a tangled incident in San Francisco on May 17, when Thoresen claimed his wife, with their six-year-old son, hit a car at a stoplight.

An eyewitness to the affair, however, told police it was Thoresen, accompanied by a private detective in another

car, who ran into the car and then sped off.

In any case, Thoresen accused his wife, who has been named as chief accomplice in gun matters, of having been behind the wheel of the car and reportedly told police, "If you lock her up, I want custody of the child."

Late last week, Thoresen was said to be in Tucson, Ariz., where he has boasted he has more than a nodding acquaintance with a close